DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 463 CS 213 869

AUTHOR Allen, Michael S.
TITLE Robin Hood in His Sherwood Forest: Audience, Gender and a Freshman Bulletin Board.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 28p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Response; College Freshmen; Computer Networks; *Electronic Mail; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication; Interpersonal Relationship; Sex Role; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Communication Behavior; Northwest Missouri State University

ABSTRACT

A composition instructor offered as extra credit an electronic bulletin board (part of a campus-wide electronic network) to a composition class at Northwest Missouri State University. The teacher limited his own participation as much as possible. The electronic bulletin board (bbs) was used by about half the class, with much of the other half reading it. One student in particular, "Robin Hood," became the ad hoc authority on the bbs. Other students respected his commitment to the network, his openness and expressiveness, his helpfulness to other students on the network, and his willingness to place all his prewriting and drafting on the network. Student participation on the network was impressive, but the interpersonal relationships of the network were strained by the expressiveness which Robin Hood's own rhetorical style encouraged. At one point, late in the semester, the heightened rhetoric and argument (based on Robin's proposal to place all hardened criminals in one location and leave them to their own devices) scared some students on the network and nearly destroyed the network itself. Robin was caught in what seems a clear gender-related issue: he did not want to give up his positions, nor did he want to exercise too much authority. Balance was only reestablished when "Bess" asserted herself and helped the men stop the violence. (RS)

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Robin Hood in His Sherwood Forest:

Audience, Gender and a Freshman Bulletin Board

Michael S. Allen
The Ohio State University--Mansfield

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ED358463

CS213569

As the use of electronic networks has become more widespread in the teaching of writing, researchers have noticed the interplay of power relationships within an academic context and among students. Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe have noted that teachers need to be careful as they establish such bulletin boards as part of their pedagogy. In "The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class," they called for a "balanced and increasingly critical perspective" in the use of such bulletin boards, "viewing our classes as site of both paradox and promise," looking toward to constructing "a mature view of how the use of electronic technology can abet our teaching" (p. 62). Hawisher and Selfe conclude their article with this cautionary admonition:

> As teachers we are authority figures. . . . Although the use of computer technology may give us greater freedom to construct more effective learning environments, it may also lead us unknowingly to assume position of power that contradict our notions of good teaching. . . . unless we plan carefully for intended outcomes, we may unwittingly use computers to maintain rigid authority structures that contribute neither to good teaching nor to good learning. (p. 64)

Hawisher and Self (1990) and Eldred (1991) have called for requiring such networks; in light of that requirement, instructors need to be circumspect in their use of power and their awareness of student participation. However, even in other situations, where an electronic network is less central to the classroom experience, instructors need to be aware of the dynamics of bulletin board use and how they can affect

one or more students in a class. This study concerns a bulletin board which was an extra-credit "add-on" to a composition class at Northwest Missouri State University. Mindful of Hawisher and Selfe's admonition about the potential for instructors to overly influence student discourse on bulletin boards, I decided to limit my participation as much as possible. With this *laissez faire* approach, the bulletin board (bbs) was used intensively by about half the class, with much of the other half reading it. With less instructor presence, one student in particular, with the moniker "Robin Hood," became the ad hoc authority on the bbs; other students respected his commitment to the network, his openness and expressiveness, his helpfulness to other students on the network, and his willingness to place all his prewriting and drafting on the network. Student participation on the network was impressive, but the interpersonal relationships of the network were strained by the expressiveness which Robin Hood's own rhetorical style encouraged. At one point, late in the semester, the heightened rhetoric and argument clearly scared some students on the network and nearly destroyed the network itself. This essay explores the relationships, levels of discourse, and issues of authority and gender in this composition classroom, student bulletin board.

Northwest Missouri State University an has few (three) computer classrooms but has a campus-wide network, through a cluster of digital VAX minicomputers, with terminals in all faculty offices, administrative offices and student dormitory rooms. Students rapidly become familiar with the campus-wide electronic network, using electronic mail for social purposes--that is, for getting dates. Rather than require student participation or construct network use around a class structure, the campus-wide network suggested that the course bulletin board should be optional and as close as possible to students' normal use of the network in their rooms. This fact alone provided a significant counterbalance to any authoritarian appropriation that I might have tended toward; students wrote on the bulletin board at their convenience, in their own rooms--sometimes at hours which are no longer within the lifestyle of middle-

aged instructors. Early on I discovered that the less I wrote on the bulletin board, the more students wrote; while at times I felt constrained to join the discussion, and at times I was invited to answer questions about reading or writing assignments, I tried to keep my own participation to a minimum.

Robin Hood enthusiastically endorsed and encouraged other students to participate on the bulletin board system (bbs). Robin's experience and confidence helped to make the bbs a student arena; he became the *ad hoc* leader of the bbs and used his power with benign intent. However, as Robin encouraged student participation on the bbs, was supportive and responsive to any and all questions asked by his peers, his belief in the bbs was essentially innocent and uncritical. He thought of it as a place where he could speak as freely as he wished and he encouraged others to do likewise. On the bbs Robin was always trying out ideas, changing them, answering challenges, revising--all in an effort to write a better essay. In analyzing his network discourse, I came to know well a kind of writer I had only heard about: someone whose very consciousness, much less writing style, was connected to, oriented toward, and shaped by computer technology, both in its word processing and network functions. Moreover, his peers enjoyed watching him work out his ideas, enjoyed seeing an example of the kind of thinking and revising which I had discussed in the classroom. Robin became something of a hero to both the class and to me: here was the writing process, open and available for all students to see, to learn from, to think about as they wrote their own essays.

However, Robin's openness and strong ethos with his peers did not inoculate him (or by extension, me) from the potential abuse of power which lies within the electronic network. The problem lay not in how Robin consciously or unconsciously used his power; but rather, the potential for abuse lay in how he <u>thought</u> about the network; to Robin, the bbs was still primarily an instrument, a thing which could help him think, write, and develop essays with the critical help of his peers. While he

saw each of those peers as an individual, and his response toward those individuals was exemplary, he did not have--nor did my *laissez faire* attitude toward the network allow him to develop--a sense of the community of his peers, a sense of audience which was greater than the sum of its participants. Eventually, Robin's model of free-wheeling discussion led to pain and discomfort among some of his peers, not so much because of things he said, as because of the "open door" attitude which he began and which I endorsed. Although I never brought any of Robin's posts into class as examples of freewriting or rough drafting, the similarity between what I had been saying in the classroom and what Robin was doing on the bbs was evident. I was content to allow the bbs to become Robin's "Sherwood Forest"; however, at the end of the course, this *laissez faire* attitude only raised further questions about the place of instructor oversight and involvement in student discussion on writing course electronic networks.

Robin and Early Network Participation:

Although there were several students who wrote on the bbs on a regular basis, Robin easily wrote more than any other student; his "posts" became a standard feature of the class. The students seemed unconcerned that one student wrote so much. This attitude may have been due, again, to the fact that computer networks were already an assumed part of student culture; it may also have been due to the fact that Robin Hood was true to his network "handle": questioning of authority, actively engaged in the "clash of discourses," resistant to his "socialization into a narrowly conceived form of academic discourse" (Hawisher and Selfe, 1990, p. 867). Indeed, his reliance upon the bulletin board as a place to develop his ideas, his active encouragement of questions (inviting his classmates to "rip (him) apart"), his changes in response to his peers' objections and questions--made him a leader; he made writing on the bbs seem easy; his invitations to join in the "fun" heightened the cachet of participation. Robin had been actively involved with computer conferencing for several years; his lack of awareness about audience may have been due to his

being "self-absorbed, producing more writer-based prose" (Eldred, 1991, p. 55, citing Turoff and Keisler). Certainly his first post (the first post on the bbs), revealed an easy-going person, unafraid to engage in his own kind of non-academic discourse, even as he satisfied the requirements of the network: to discuss reading and writing assignments, as he referred to the upcoming essay assignment, a review:

> Hello fellow classmates and professor. . . . How's those papers? Mine going pretty good, but I was wondering. . . Is it essential to the paper to know co-stars names???? I'm doing my paper on a book I read several years ago and the lib. doesn't have it, and I can't remember the names of the co-stars. . . I know the plot, time, place, and the people . . . . but I can't remember their names. . . Now I know the main charater and the significance of the others . . . What do the rest of you think??? Should I change books??? I have another, but it's not as intersting as my current one. . . . . Desperately seeking some advise. . . . . Robin Hood

In terms of power relationships, I find this an interesting first post: Robin clearly knows that his instructor (it took some time for me to become "Mike" instead of "professor") is reading, but he immediately stakes out a discourse space which does not belong to the professor but to himself and his classmates. He opens the discussion with informality and questions, inviting his classmates' responses both generally ("What do the rest of you think??? ") and with a practical question ("Should I change books???"). The additional question marks, the use of ellipses, the references to movie culture ("co-stars," "Desperately seeking"--a reference to an early Madonna film) underscore the fact that this discourse space is informal, conversational, and definitely part of youth culture, not academic or professorial culture. In short, Robin's first post stakes a claim on the bulletin board which challenges "school culture" with youth culture, which takes the discourse level out of the hands of the "professor" and creates a space where students can "talk". And yet, as he stakes out this "student" discourse space, Robin is fulfilling the purpose of the bbs: a place for

students to talk about the class. Moreover, in asking questions, Robin starts a discussion; four students immediately answered, urging him to change topics. Robin did, deciding to write a review of Van Halen, an idea which led to another's student's entry on the bbs. Thus, Robin's claim-staking established parameters which are familiar academically (an authority figure directing discussion, encouraging participation) and new and different in other ways (the casual, youth culture discourse style). With such a beginning, the bbs both established a replication of the conventional lines of academic authority, but with a style and in a cultural context more familiar to the students.

Robin's peers began a pattern of response which Robin readily copied and indeed developed into a formula: answering previous questions before raising new concerns. In the second on the network, "Bess" generally follows this pattern; however, she also adopts a more tentative approach to offering advice, one which suggests that she did not want to offend him. Beginning with a cheery "Hi Everybody!", she first proposes that Robin "go ahead" with his topic, but then she changes her recommendation in a couple of sentences: " . . . I think [Robin's] paper is a good idea, but since he doesn't really have anyone else doing a book review he might not know what to expect." To Bess, as to Robin, the bbs represents a way to get some help from other students, but her help is less intrusive than that which Robin seeks; she sees the bbs as a parallel to the groups in classroom writing workshops, something new and unexpectedly positive in her experience of writing classes:

> I know that the groups we have in class help me a lot. The other students catch my errors and I do the same for them. I have learned so far in this class that it is not really that bad to write. I really dreaded having to have an hour of English composition because I didn't like to write and I never felt good about writing, if that makes any sense to anyone. Now, I like coming to class and discussing the reading material and thinking about the different

> ideas the writer's try to get across to their audience. My paper is coming along and I look forward to seeing you in class tomorrow.

As Robin, Bess did not look forward to a positive experience in English, and the groups and bbs seem a welcome surprise. Unlike Robin, Bess seems to see the bbs not so much as an instrument to help her writing but as a way to be connected to other students, to develop the same kind of relationship she has in the classroom writing groups. Like Bess, "Sandi Lee" adds her "two cents worth" about Robin's situation; her advice, however, offers more options than Bess did: he should "stick with [his] book" but also check the public library for a copy; but he "could probably build a good essay without (the characters' names), if you have to." Both Bess and Sandi Lee offer Robin advice with plenty of options, leaving the decision up to him and focusing on the relationship they wish to establish rather than on any single piece of advice. "Hawkeye", the next writer, does not offer any advice; instead, after opening by mentioning the weather ("pretty bad weather out don't cha think . . ."), he focuses on his own problems:

> Well, I'm kind of in a trap. I think I over researched my topic. I have so much information that it's coming out of my ear. I don't know where to start. I guess there's a lesson to be learned here--if you over research your paper, you don't have much thinking to do. This makes a problem because you can't write down other people's work. You have to use your own and if you don't have to think what do you put down on paper. Oh well I'll try to manage. . .

Looking at Hawkeye's first post with the advantage of hindsight, I can see some of the elements that played an important part in the eventual development of the bbs. His conventional reference to the weather may seem a small thing, but his lack of response to his classmates stands out: among the first posts (indeed, among the whole length of some 220 posts), Hawkeye's is the only post which did not first respond to another student's post. If I had been able to see just that much, I might have been able to

respond more creatively to Hawkeye's situation and helped him to develop the confidence and trust--the ethos--which seemed to come to the other students more naturally. Moreover, his discourse contains another conventional cliche ("there's a lesson to be learned here") and his problem centers on a problem of authority. Specifically, Hawkeye came to me and said that he felt that he could not write a review with just his own ideas, and so he wanted to make his essay a collection of other people's comments. I thought that Hawkeye was simply making the assignment into something more difficult than it was meant to be and tried to assure him that his ideas would be good enough for the paper. Sandi Lee, in her response to Hawkeye, was even more direct than I had been: " Hawkeye, Why don't you forget using the info that you looked up for now, and just write what you know. Then when you are finished, add in some facts that fit." Robin, who had not known of my conversation with Hawkeye, had been in a writing group with Hawkeye and had seen all the biographical information and reviewers' comments which Hawkeye had assembled; he advised Hawkeye:

> Well Hawkeye I think that you should limit yourself, but use the most important facts . . . . [sic--Robin used ellipses as pause markers] If you use too many facts, the essey will be a discriptive one . . . You should use facts that you learned to interrege [interest?] the reader into finding the greater details for theirself . . . give them a taste and then let them lie . . . Be sure to include enough to tell about the person [. . .]

And so on; Robin's response to Hawkeye tries to be helpful, but Hawkeye's problem was probably larger than simply that essay. With hindsight I can see the anxiety behind Hawkeye's quest for information, for making an essay which would be "right", which would have "real" authority. Hawkeye's anxiety about writing centered on the issue of his authority, how he could obtain and defend it. He tried to copy Robin's free-wheeling stance but without Robin's responsive bbs ethos. Unlike Robin, Hawkeye did not view the bbs as a place to test ideas, change and revise ideas, but

as a place to take and maintain a position; unlike Sandi Lee and Bess, Hawkeye did not view the bbs as a place for relationship like the groups in class. Rather, the bbs became a place where Hawkeye fought battles--and in doing so, he brought pain to some participants and confusion to his friend, Robin.

The early participation on the bbs revealed what was to become a standard pattern of participants: responses to questions, followed by new ideas and questions. The early participation also began to reveal some differences in the way male and female students used and saw the bbs. Hawkeye seemed to see the bbs as a place to do battle, to attack others' ideas and opinions, and to defend his own; Sandi Lee and Bess saw the bbs as a place to develop relationships. These patterns were duplicated, to differing degrees, by other students: although "Kent" answered questions and developed a modicum of ethos in his relationships with other participants, he too came to see the bbs as a place to do battle; and although "Martha" often had her own battles, she approached them in a much more relationship-sensitive way than did either Kent or Hawkeye. The differences in stance and tone between male and female students suggest the "hierarchy of values" and the "web of connection" which Carol Gilligan develops in *In A Different Voice*. For Robin, the hierarchy and web themselves seemed intertwined, as he saw the bbs as part of his achievement, part of his value system; while he would propose ideas and defend them, he always seemed to do so within the context of respect for his peers' comments and questions. The deterioration of discourse on the bbs, as Hawkeye pursued his own rhetorical battles, caused much pain for Robin, who had developed a friendship with Hawkeye outside of class, but whose behavior on the bbs was increasingly problematic. The conflict within Robin reached a climax later in the semester when, in one of his posts, he "screamed": "Hawkeye, OPEN YOUR MIND DUDE, geez I've never seen any one KILLJOY mania press an issue for this long. usually they endup killing the person they are arguing against long before this." Robin's comment hit the mark: Hawkeye's participation on the bbs was fraught with male territoriality, privilege, and violence. Hawkeye's aggressive

presence on the bbs challenged and undermined the cooperative ethos which Robin and the other students had established and--with some momentary stumbles--maintained. The problem was more pressing for Robin than for the other students, since in Hawkeye, Robin could see himself: a young man with a desire to take a strong stand and argue a position; the difference between Robin and Hawkeye lay in Robin's ability to adjust, to learn from his respondents and to learn more about audience and his connection to them, both on the bbs and in the greater world.

Robin's Sherwood Forest Becomes New York City

Later in the semester, Robin began exploiting the bbs for everything it offered. For a proposal paper, he chose a topic which elicited protest, much debate, and resulted in his writing screens-full of ideas in answer to his classmates; objections. His proposal, modeled after a violent film of a few year's ago, *Escape from New York*, was to place all hardened criminals in one location, wall them in, and leave them to their own devices. He began his post with evident delight: "Oh boy have I got one hell of a post for you people, so let's get started. . . ." His remark is interesting for its emblematic combination of three aspects in Robin's bbs discourse: his innocence ("Oh boy"), his tough guy image ("one hell of a post") and his identification with both the instrumental nature of the bbs and his connections to his peers ("let's get started"). That last remark could be taken as a teacher's comment, an expression of friendly authority, but an authoritative position nonetheless. However, his comment should also be seen as a statement of Robin's connectedness to his bbs peers, since instead of discussing his proposal topic, Robin, true to form, first maintains his network connections: "I'll answer some questions asked and request a few things from some others." Robin may not have been aware that he needed all that nurturing of his connections, given that the topic he had chosen came as something of shock to several of his readers (including his instructor):

> Well as for myself, I'm doing my paper on Population control of prisons. how can we solve the current problem and look out for the future. . . I have told several people of my solutions and they just laugh nd say "But it'll never happen. It's not possible." I never said it would work, I just said that it was a realistic solution.

Immediately there seems to be some contradiction between whether such an idea "would work" and its being "realistic"; to Robin, "realistic" may have meant "believable", or it could have meant "realistic" for an English essay. And of course there is also a conflict between the rhetoric of the rest of Robin's post and the topic he puts forward. His rhetoric is connected to others, even nurturing. For "Malcolm", who is proposing adding African Studies to the curriculum, Robin's support is immediate: "Malcolm, Great topic, I like the idea of equel time for everyone. . . I do think we, as students and humans, should learn about everyone, not just the Europe people, etc. I know very little about the other continents history and what actually happened . . . . " And for Bess's proposal about addressing the increase of rape on campus, Robin gives a screen-full of answers to her survey questions--the fullest set of answers to appear on the bbs. When Robin finally gets to his own proposal, he seems to understand that it will provoke opposition, as he couches it in an imagined dialogue, answering some of his opposition's questions even before they are asked:

> You say that they have done this before and Australia is the product, well this is a little different, but with the same idea, it's different by the fact that if you come too close to the wall your target practice. (*a lot like the old Iron Curtain huh?? you bet*) give them a chance to live, let them farm for food, let them build houses for protection from weather, and let them protect themselves from other prisoners. . . .

Like some nightmare from Social Darwinism via Pat Buchanan, Robin went on, merrily offending all the liberal sensibilities of his professor. At

this point, I had some serious reservations about having given up my authority on the bbs and encouraged students to say whatever they wished. However, I noticed that Robin had developed a way of signalling that some of his remarks should be read differently, by marking them with an asterisk, in his reference to the iron curtain in this post. Robin wanted some more "private" space for comments which might be too provocative or might be misinterpreted; several times his asterisks surrounded "joke" or "grin" as signs that his potentially inflammatory ideas should not be taken seriously. Early in this post Robin cracks a joke after he spells "Hypocritical" correctly: (*god am I bad with words and spelling or what??*). His joke signals to his bbs peers (and to me) that Robin is aware of his notorious spelling as he "cruises" in his typing on the bbs; moreover, his joke contains the "street" usage of "bad", a rhetorical gesture to his bbs peers, part of their shared culture. Robin may have known consciously, but he certainly must have understood intuitively, that his choice of topic would cause some confrontation from his peers. However, I do not think he was aware of how much conflict his topic choice would cause. It incited some of his bbs-mates to an argument of increasing stridency, leading Robin to move from his favored role as agent provocateur to conciliator.

Robin's introduction of his proposal on the bbs led to an immediate, sustained series of posts, with fourteen in one day, generating a conflict which seemed to have a life of its own. The conflict began with Hawkeye's dismissal of Robin's idea as mere Hollywood and a call for even tougher measures:

> We have to remember that Hollywood is fantasy and doesn't solve problems. . . . It doesn't matter a criminal is always going to be a criminal no matter where they are put. The solution is the death penalty. Oh no OH no we are to civilized nation to allow this to go on, we can't kill a human being. Give him counseling show him love. He was hurt when he was a child, just show him love,. something thats been lacking in his life. . . .

Hawkeye's enjambed syntax and pronounced sarcasm convey a strong emotional response to the general topic of crime and punishment which dominates his post after "dissing" Robin's specific proposal. While other students attacked Hawkeye's position, Robin responded by making an appeal to Hawkeye ("First Hawkeye, The death penalty is an optional solution, thanks for bring that to my attention") and then distancing himself from Hawkeye's position ("The big thing about the death penalty is that too many people disagree with, as Malcolm says, "where to draw the line"). The rhetoric of Robin's response follows his general pattern of responding to other peer's ideas first, and even adopting other peer's ideas; for Robin, all positions have a place on the bbs and can be learned from, used to think about, reconsider and further define his own position. Robin's idea of ethos, however, soon begins to loose power as the bbs is soon overtaken by a debate on capital punishment which reaches an intensity frightening to all participants. It begins when Sandi Lee doubts Robin's proposal but attacks Hawkeye's endorsement of capital punishment:

> Sounds like a good idea to me. BUT, How can this work? The food has to come from somewhere, the power, everything must be brought in from the outside, at least at first. So the BIG PRISON may be a BIG EXPENSE . . . .
>
> Hawkeye! ! ! ! !
> No person has the right to act as God! You can't just kill people! All we can do is find ways to protect society from them, that's all. When they die, they will pay for their mistakes. But no person has the right to kill someone for ANY REASON! !

and then she ends her post with "P.S. Remember Hawkeye, KILLING IS A NO NO." Sandi Lee may have intended her remarks as humorous, but Hawkeye's response is grim (ellipses included in his message--perhaps an influence from Robin?):

> Sandi Lee--What about killing babies? Is that OK? What about killing in war?? What about killing in self defense? Killing is a NO no? I don't think so . . . What would you rather have . . . in your words "wierdos" living comfortably on our tax dollars. I would rather see them in the ground. I don't know where you are from but where I come from I've seen people younger than me carrying guns and flashing them . . .

As if participating in some spiralling replay of gender stereotypes, Sandi Lee responds to Hawkeye's macho toughness with a post that takes the ethic of care to its logical extreme:

> No, I don't believe in baby killing, or abortion as some call it. I don't believe that we are better off killing everyone that makes a mistake, even a big one. I don't know how else to explain it other than, ANY KILLING IS WRONG. That includes wars and everything. I know that people die in wars, that doesn't make them right. I know people kill there babies, that doesn't make them right, I don;'t know how else to get you to understand that we do not have the right to take a life, to throw it away because it is in the way. People are not disposable!!!!

And, as if this increasingly strident argument wasn't enough, "Feasable" attacks Robin's idea for its not being "feasable" (hence his new handle, changed from his given name at this time on the bbs). As I had secretly hoped, at least one student, Kent, responded to Robin's idea with a greater sense of historical context and substantial outrage; however, Kent's language includes a level of personal vitriol that is usually found only among English faculty:

> Your plan reminds me of a certain event in our history. When you place one group of people in a lower society then you are saying that you are superior. To me that sounds like genocide. Yes

> Genocide. Have you heard of WWII, and Hitler. They put jews in their own cities where they could grow the food if they wanted to etc. and take showers. It is an extremely sick idea that you have come up with. I would honestly be afraid to ever spend any time with someone who could see this as clear rational thinking.

Clearly, this was more response--and different response--than Robin had hoped for. His reaction was to accept some of the responsibility which accompanied his assumption of ad hoc authority:

> Hawkeye I agree that the death penalty is a possibility and PARTIAL solution. Some criminals can be reformed on that point I agree with Sandi Lee. You have to be able to know when to Quit though. You can't say, "ok well they didn't learn this time, so...." and then proceed to reform them over and over. I believe that they should have only so many chances to learn, or so many chances to be reformed. Murders and Rapeists only get one shot at reform, as far as I'm concerned, after that they took the rights away from 2 or more people. They don't deserve another chance. They obviously can't grasp a concept of sharing freedom, so take it away perminatly. don't kill them just make them live a life without rights. Which is my proposal. . . .

Some of this is more of Robin's tough talk ("one shot at reform") but already, he has started modifying his position rhetorically, conceding a point to Sandi Lee ("Some criminals can be reformed") and stating his case in a somewhat less offensive manner to her ("don't kill them just make them live a life without rights"). As in his earlier conflict with Martha, Robin seems to listen more carefully to responses and suggestions from his female rather than male respondents. While Robin may have "hung out" with Hawkeye outside of class, he listened more closely to Martha and Sandi Lee.

Robin's post continues with two screens-full of development of his proposal, complete with "Today the average cost to keep a prisoner behind bars is roughly $27,000 a year," the amount of acreage (400 acres) for the prison, a comparison with reservations ("we have been doing similar things to the original inhabitants for the past 50-100 years, and the Indians are supposed to be normal citizens. We treat them worse than we treat the criminals, let's switch things around.") and a plea that his proposal is actually a moderate position (between Hawkeye and Sandi Lee): "I am tring to show these two sides a middle land, but I seem to be getting pushed aside. Come on Class members jump in a speak your mind, it can never hurt." Robin's proposal--based on fantasy, but connected to the real world (prison costs, the comparison with Amerindian reservations)--was in some ways a reflection of his bbs discourse: violent imagery in language that was trying to make real connections. However, there is something strained in his insistence that if his classmates speak their minds, "It can never hurt." Never? Robin seems to be retreating to his innocent belief in bulletin board technology, in his "friendly confrontation" rhetoric, in his genuine concern for his bbs peers and his belief that the bbs connections can be maintained no matter what the tone of the discussion.

The strain on bbs relationships became apparent to Robin, and his last post on the prison proposal is clearly labeled, perhaps intentionally, as a signal to his peers to stop arguing, "Final entry for Prison paper," and he begins his post with "Ok here's the last one." Importantly, the person Robin turns to first, to answer her objections, is Martha, who had objected to his most macho, most radical proposal: forced sterilization. Robin sees his proposal as a solution to a problem and sees it in black/white, either/or terms. Martha sees the idea as a violation of human rights and sees the issue as more complex, fitting into a web of concerns about how we treat human beings. As if believing that his language was less provocative than it was, Robin asks Martha to reread his previous post and then restates his general idea in terms that adopt some of Martha's concern for human rights: "I believe in love and I believe that people have

morals, but there comes a time when that person should learn the hard way to their actions, which they are responsible for." Robin recognizes the importance of human relationships ("I believe in love"), but after that statement (or is it only a rhetorical gesture to Martha?) he marshalls cliches from the authoritarian rhetoric that stands behind and informs his proposed topic: "there comes a time," "people should learn the hard way," "actions, which they are responsible for." Robin continues, trying to put his proposal for sterilization in a good light: "Remember the reason for sterialization (sic) was so you wouldn't have the children in prisons, or do you want it that way?? I know I don't and I thought that you were one of those who spoke up against having children in the prisons." The discourse reveals the conflict within Robin's own thinking; he uses "you" in what could equally be a general, informal way or a personal way, referring to Martha specifically; the first part of the sentence is calm, a statement, but the second part turns to a question and attacks (". . . do you want it that way??") Then he returns to a calm tone, stating his position and what he thinks is hers ("and I thought that you were one of those . . ."). Ultimately, though, Robin can only see the problem in terms of an either/or, not in terms of the web of nuances which Martha has suggested; while asking for a way out of his either/or, he still is committed to it:

> If you still don't like the Idea of sterializing those prisoners, going into the BIG PRISON, then please give me another solution. Right now it's either:
>
> A--Sterialized Prisoners
> B--Children inside the prison.

Robin's response to Martha suggests he was going through some pain as he tried to follow his proposal through to its logical connection but remain connected to his peers on the bbs. There may be a "mirroring" quality in Robin's rhetoric to his bbs peers and to his developing understanding of audience; while his rhetoric toward Martha is calm; his rhetoric toward Kent is less gentle and more dramatic, a mirror of Kent's own previous

attack ("Robin Hood you plan has more holes in it than a piece of swiss cheese"; "I think Mr. Allen will chew your paper into pieces"):

> Kent, you say it's genocide for steri lization of women, and children shouldn't be part of the prison, so I need to come up with another solution, right?? Wrong!! I can live with these sterialized prisoners, if you can't then so something you haven't done yet, TELL ME A BETTER SOLUTION TO THE ENTIRE OVER-CROWDED PRISON PROBLEM!!!!!!!!!!!!!

What is interesting about Robin's reply to Kent is its focus on the issue and not Kent himself; unlike Kent, who has gone beyond discussing Robin's ideas to deriding Robin himself ("I would honestly be afraid to ever spend any time with someone who could see this as clear rational thinking"), Robin does not attack Kent. Perhaps the reason is Robin's underlying belief in his bbs connections, or in the possibility that someone on the bbs will say something that will give him a new idea, change his mind, and lead to a better paper. Robin's all-capitals sentence ("TELL ME. . .:") is as much a matter of begging as of commanding. His rhetoric suggests that even at this late hour in his writing process, he--or that rhetorical part of him--is willing to revise, to change; unfortunately, another part of him--the innocent, tough guy part of him--cannot see the possibility of change.

After all the *sturm und drang* of the four day period of these 35 bbs posts, the final product which Robin produced is remarkable for one overriding fact: there seem to be few traces of all the violent rhetoric, the struggle between electronic connectedness and conservative ideas. What emerges as Robin's final draft is a remarkable calm, rhetorically conservative document that struggles to keep the violence of the proposal's genesis and the violence of the proposal itself equally at bay under a rhetorical veneer of understatement and classical rhetoric. It seems ironic that all of Robin's free-for-all, youth culture, "in-your-face"

expressiveness should yield this document. Here is the first paragraph and the central part of the proposal:

> Criminals are roaming the streets in America as they please, due to the problem of prison population. The United States of America has a very serious problem. That problem isn't going to go away, it's going to get worse. Criminals are turned [out] on probation when prisons are too full. That means murderers, rapists, and other felony criminals go back out onto the street, where they can comment more crime. America's criminal system needs to be changed to cope with the higher number of criminals. The current way of handling a criminal isn't working. Compared to ten years ago, there is a 30% increase in the number of repeat offenders. There is also a 22% increase in criminal activity since 1981. I have a three part solution to this population problem: stricter laws, rehabiliation, and a new prison.
>
> . . .
>
> The final part of this solution to this problem is to create a place to put those criminals who refuse to abide by the laws, and refuse to rehabilitate. This place would create a society consisting strictly of criminals. It'll be different from a prison in many ways. There will be no cells, one wall, and no way out. This place will consist of one wall surrounding a large area of land. This wall will be at least four stories tall. In this wall, there will be guards. There will be buildings outside of this wall with equipment for detecting those prisoners who try to dig themselves our. Inside of this wall there will be a "No Man's Land" where the prisoners will be shot if they tried [to put a?] foot onto this part of the land. "No Man's Land" would consist of an area starting at the base of the wall and going in one hundred yards. This land would be burned of all vegetation and covered with sand or rock. Beyond "No Man's Land" the prisoners will eat, sleep, and survive. The prisoners will be forced to grow and hunt for food, because none will be provided from the

> outside. The only thing the prisoners will be provided with when they enter are clothes, seeds for planting, and their lives. In order to be sent to this prison the criminal must have had a chance at rehabilitation, committed a felony, and spent time in a prison.

If I had received this essay without having watched its progress through the "clash of discourse" on the bbs, I would have thought the prose simplistic, even juvenile in places. However, within the context of all the forgoing struggle, I read the essay as some latter-day rendering of that battle-scarred consciousness in Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" ("He was very hungry and he wanted to make his camp before he cooked. Between two jack pines, the ground was level. He took the axe out of the pack and chopped out two projecting roots.. . .). After all the questions and objections, Robin is trying to be as clear as he can be, risking appearing condescending by repeating "There will be" in his paratactic style. Even his repetition of "No Man's Land" evokes World War I connections. Beyond his pained description are his use of tricolons: four throughout the "big prison" paragraph, each one emphasizing a defining aspect of the prison:

1) physical: "no cells, one wall, and no way out";
2) prisoners' activities: "eat, sleep, and survive":
3) provisions: "clothes, seeds for planting, and their lives";
4) prisoners' qualifications: "had a chance at rehabilitation, committed a felony, and spent time in prison."

Each of Robin's tricolons provides rhetorical emphasis and *gravitas* to his proposal and helps distance the proposal from the objections which his bbs peers raised and the emotions which nearly seemed to destroy the bbs dialogue. Robin needs the structure within the paragraph to reinforce his main ideas; he also needs a rigid structure throughout the essay simply to contain the whole proposal, which has become bigger and more complicated as Robin has brought into his proposal his answers to his peers' objections.

Robin's proposal is interesting, even remarkable, in its shape, tone and structure. Out of all the evident "chaos" within the bbs discussion came an essay with a clear, even rigid outline; however, as one looks more closely at that outline, the connection between this cold, detached document and the bbs discussion is clear: Robin has organized his essay around the objections from his peers:

I. Introduction: problem statement leading to thesis statement ("I have a three part solution. . .")
II. First Part: Stricter Laws: defines "criminal" and rejects rights of prisoners (answers Kent)
III. Second Part: Rehabilitation through Work: includes definitions of different crimes (answer Bess and Estelle)
IV. Third Part: The Big Prison: developed in cold logic and classical style (detached and impervious)
V. Consequences of Prison: 1. use as deterrent to crime; 2. ultimate logic of lawlessness: a place with no law.
VI. Answers Opposition: Stricter Laws: they would undermine other people's freedoms (answers Hawkeye)
VII. Answers Opposition: Sterilization: "Children don't deserve to live in this kind of society" (answers Martha)
VIII. Concession to Opposition: Money: "Money is a problem for building this big prison" (answers Sandi Lee)
IX. Rebuttal to Opposition: "A cheaper, but less ethical way of dealing with repeat offenders is the death penalty" (answers Hawkeye)
X. Conclusion: concludes with a trope on "law": "If the criminals break the laws again, it is our duty to . . . put them in a society where the only law is the law of survival."

The above outline demonstrates how thoroughly Robin's proposal essay was "socially constructed," not in a general, theoretical way, but in a specific, practical way. It is one of the ironies of this study that Robin's

essay is so thoroughly socially constructed, and yet Robin produced the essay with little retard for the audience awareness and cultural sensitivity which informs so much of social construction theory.

Robin after the Storm

In the post-class interview, I asked Robin if he had chosen his topic in order to be provocative, and what he had thought about when he became the moderator for others' debate:

> I was looking for a topic with a feasible solution. They offered options and said what was wrong with my idea. soon one side was saying "Kill 'em" and the other side was saying "Rehab 'em" so I became the moderator. Was it provocative? Yes and no. I had had the idea before, but I also chose it to get ideas off the bbs. I didn't have a set proposal; I only had a rough idea. It was like I had a lump of clay and I put it into the molder, the bbs, and I brought it out and printed it and Viola!

There is still a certain radical innocence about discourse and audience in Robin's remarks. He may have become more aware of his audience in constructing his final draft, but he still seems to conceive of the bbs as an instrument, a "place" detached from other social constraints. His use of the word "provocative" exemplifies his innocence: he is aware of his understanding of his intent: that he had thought about the topic before; he hadn't just thought it up for this class, for the bbs; but he is not as aware of any social context for the topic itself, outside of his own intention and the utility of the topic for the network (and the network for the topic). Robin's innocence suggests connections to the culture at large. There are places in Robin's discourse where his language mimics the soundbite rhetoric of Ross Perot ("It's that simple"; "let's turn this thing around"), and there seems to be a similar pattern of thought: dramatic, simplistic, theatrical thinking, enthusiastically presented and reaching out for assent, but without much

prior thought about the audience (e.g. Perot's use of "you people" at the NAACP convention).

Part of Robin's innocence about audience may have lain in his believe in the bbs itself. Robin's metaphor for his writing process--taking a lump of clay and letting the bbs act as a "molder"--suggests that as he gave authority to the network, he increased his own identification with it. This identification with and validation of the bbs as a way of discovering ideas, thinking about issues and developing language, suggest an interesting, even provocative "fit" between Robin's metaphor for composing on the bbs and social constructionist thought. As his proposal idea was first an ill-formed "lump of clay" that he placed on the bbs, he viewed the responses of his audience as part of the technology--part of the bbs itself, not parts of individuals speaking on the network. But the metaphor also reveals a mythology which distorted the performance of Robin and his peers on the bbs. Through his reliance on the bbs as technology, Robin was able to increase his own freedom of expression as he increased his distance from his peers, identifying their responses with the technology of the network, objectifying their responses and their values, and minimizing the connection between their responses and their identities. But as the discussion intensified--and as he reaped the benefits of his peers' responses, questions and suggestions--Robin both increased his use of the bbs (reinforcing his belief in the alchemy of his technological metaphor) and developed, slowly, a greater sensitivity toward his peers. It seems that he began to see, beyond the messages on the screen, the classmates whom he wanted to help--partially because he wanted to encourage their participation and the efficacy of the technological metaphor--and whom he did not want to lose.

Much of this combination of technological distances and rhetorical intimacy may have had its roots in an earlier exchange between Robin and Martha, where the bbs was used to re-establish strained relations after a harsh discussion in the classroom. Robin's classroom experience led him to respect Martha in his dialogues with her on the bbs; similarly, Martha,

while disagreeing with Robin in class and on the bbs, developed ways of couching her disagreements within a supportive ethos. There is a curious irony to their relationship: while Robin believed in the bbs as a way to construct thought and language, Martha did not; she admitted at the end of the class that she often had written our her posts in longhand before entering them on the bbs; she thought through her relationship with her audience (beginning with Robin) before speaking in what was always to her a public forum. With further irony, Martha's sensitivity to her audience led her to maintain her support for Robin, thus validating his authority and presence on the network and thereby encouraging his identification with it, his personal use of it as a place to think through his ideas, and his *ad hoc* authority among the network of peers. ,

Bolstered by his use of the bbs to overcome his and Martha's classroom disagreement, Robin used his authority in the network to try and moderate the more strident disagreement between Sandi Lee and Hawkeye. Robin reached out to both as they attacked each other's positions and each other. Robin's actions suggest a contrast between his ethos on the network and his lack of a corresponding ethos toward the larger social context; his sense of ethos was highly localized within the network, detached from other ethical dimensions, such as an awareness of how inflammatory his topic was within the culture at large. His comments to Sandi Lee were supportive ("Sandi Lee, you have a good mind to help everyone. I respect that. . . " followed by a play on Lincoln's maxim: "You can satisfy some of the people some of the time. . . "). His comments to Hawkeye showed his exasperation but were essentially friendly ("Hawkeye, OPEN YOUR MIND DUDE, gees I've never seen any one KILLJOY mania press an issue for this long. usually they endup killing the person they are arguing against long before this. . . . "). However, while Robin might not have been aware of how his topic selection in itself was inflammatory, and while he continued to follow his free-for-all expressiveness, it became clear to some of his peers and myself that Robin was wrestling with the conflict he had helped to engender on the bbs. Clearly, Robin did not want to surrender his expressiveness--or

anyone else's; however, he also did not want to see the bbs discussion die, or watch participants leave because the tone of the discussion had become too angry and unfriendly. It was not Robin who sought and gained closure of the debate; it was Bess, whose post is a heartfelt cry, full of her own desire to maintain the web of connections which the bbs represented and called into existence, before it was threatened by the Hawkeye-Sandi Lee argument:

> Can we let the prison issue rest, since our papers are done now? Thanks!! Some people can be talked to and talked to but they won't change their position and you have to know when to stop and just say enough, I've done all I could, so please, no more arguing. I just hate to see people at each other's throats that's all.

Bess's post, from its opening question (it is noteworthy that she does not demand an end, but requests it, calling for collective, cooperative action) to its enjambed syntax and exasperated close, showed how frightening all the unleashed emotion on the bbs had been for the students. Hawkeye, Sandi Lee, Kent, Robin--they had given new life to the cliche "at each other's throats." When I read Bess's post I felt fully the danger implicit in the laissez faire network. As I had watched the rapid-fire dialogue, I debated whether or not to enter into the bbs, to calm things down, to call a halt to the acrimony. As I read Bess's post, I felt I should have stepped in: after all, regardless of Robin's ad hoc authority, regardless of the students creating their own "space" on the network, I was ultimately responsible, not they. However, Bess's post made me reconsider yet again whether I should enter the discussion; there was some value to the fact that the students themselves--or perhaps the network itself (a technological idea that Robin would endorse)--had handled the issue before I could: Bess's plea for an end to the argument was simple, direct, clear, and quick. I remembered how seductive the bbs was to my own expressiveness--how quickly I became wordy on it, how easy it was for my post to seem authoritarian because long, how my earlier posts had had

the chilling effect of stopping the discussion for a day or two. That Bess felt comfortable asking for, and receiving, closure indicated the freedom she felt to assert her own presence and identity on the bbs. While Robin could start the bbs, start discussion and debate, he could not end it; only one of his peers--and importantly a woman peer--could do that.

Conclusion

Robin was caught in what seems a clear gender-related issue: he did not want to give up his positions (either in his argument or in his authority on the network), nor did he want to exercise too much authority (could he tell people to stop arguing? what authority did he have to do that? he was not a professor, and moreover the argument had its roots in his own topic). Robin's either/or pattern of thinking--encouraged by the tough-guy poses in his own rhetoric--led him into great difficulty. He believed in the bbs technology but that technology had revealed itself to be more complicated and contextual than he had imagined. He valued greatly the connection with the bbs gave him to his classmates, but he may not have quite seen that the bbs connections were more a matter of personal relationships than of the network technology itself. If for most men, as Gilligan suggests in a thumbnail summary, "Relationships often are cast in the language of achievement" (154), Robin's identification with the bulletin board led to a sense that his "achievement"--his authority on the bbs--was "cast in the language of relationships." But Robin, like some men, saw the achievement more than the language of the relationships. The confrontation between Hawkeye and Sandi Lee endangered the achievement because it endangered the relationship. Rather than trust the technology of the network, Robin needed to see the network as subservient to the "language of relationship," the social context within which all of us lives. Martha had seen that earlier, and Robin, to his credit, had seen it in relationship to her. Although Robin gave signals that he wanted to end the acrimonious debate, his signals ("Ok here's the last one") were as much to the bbs itself that to Hawkeye or Sandi Lee.

Significantly, Robin could not end the discussion; his vision of the bbs--based as it was on his Internet experiences, his tough-guy persona, his free-wheeling expressiveness, and the laissez-faire atmosphere sanctioned by his intructor--did not encourage him to develop a balanced view of rhetorical expressiveness and rhetorical sensitivity. That balance was only re-established when Bess, who had been Robin's first respondent long ago, asserted herself and her more connected, "web"-conscious perspective. The conflict spawned by hierarchy and male aggerssion ended when a woman asserted herself and helped the men stop the violence.

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